

The first colours

Today, choosing colours is as easy as opening a paintbox.

But the very first artists had to make colours by hand,
using whatever ingredients they could find.



The oldest known paintings were made tens of thousands of years ago, on the walls of rocky caves. Early artists drew black outlines with burned wood, then added colour with earthy pastes.

Bison by an unknown artist from Altamira, Spain, about 15-13,000 years ago

Some earth comes naturally in a range of colours, including reds, yellows and browns known as othres. These were used by the earliest cave artists. They are still used to make paints today.

These pots contain coloured earths and othres of the kind used by early cave artists.



Thousands of years later, in ancient Egypt, artists discovered new materials and methods for making colours. They ground up coloured rocks and glass, and heated ingredients to produce a new colour, Egyptian blue.

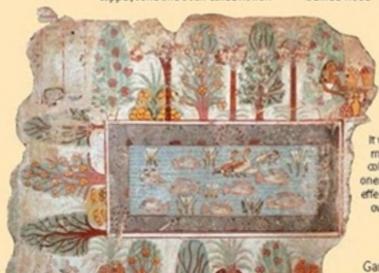
This set of colours belonged to an Egyptian artist who lived over 3,400 years ago...

Green, made by mixing Egyptian Red ochre bluewith yellow ochreandminerals



Egyptian blue, made by baking balls of copper, sand and a salt called natron

Blacksmadefrom burned wood



Thisg arden scene was painted on the wall of a rich Egyptian's tomb.

It would have been made with a set of colours very like the oneabove although the effect has faded a little over the centuries.

Garden with Ornamental Pool by an unknown Egyptian artist, about 3,350 years ago

Glass Vase (1736-95) by an unknown Chinese artist

Sunny yellows

You might not think of metals as colourful, but lead and tin have been used to make yellow for hundreds of years.

Chemicals made from lead and tin were first used as yellows in glass-making and pottery. These chemicals are what give this glass vase its colour.

> When heated, the same chemicals create an artists' colourknown as lead-tin yellow.



Garden of Eden (detail of pottery tiles, 1761) by Leonardo Chiaiese

Yellow is the colour of sunshine and is linked with joy. So it was the perfect colour to fill this picture of paradise.

These warm, orangeyyellows come from chemicals made from lead, tin and an other sort of metal known as antimony.

These were painted onto pottery tiles and then baked to produce the colours. This lady's glowing golden dress was painted in lead-tin yellow. The rich, strong colour helps to draw your eyes towards her – a new bride, in a picture created to celebrate her marriage.



Lady Elizabeth Thimbelby and her Sister (about 1637) by Anthony van Dyck

Other natural yellows included...

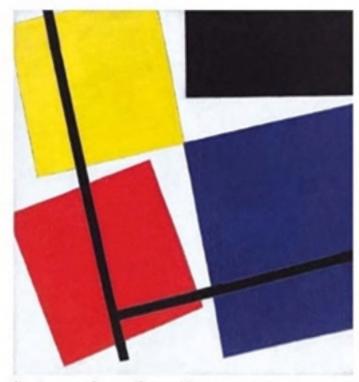
Indianyellowbecamepopular in the 15th century. It was made out of the wee of cows fed on mango leaves.



Orpiment was a rich golden yellow first used by the ancient Egyptians. It came from a poisonous rocky mineral.

Primary colours

For many artists, the primary colours of red, yellow and blue are especially important.



Simultaneous Counter-Composition (1929-30) by Theo van Doesburg

A hundred years ago, a group of artists tried to create a harmonious modern style using *only* primary colours, plus black and white, in neat blocks and lines.

Some artists even used the style on furniture.



Saint Cecilia (1620-25) by Pietro da Cortona

This painting shows an early Christian saint. Her red, yellow and blue dothes help to make her stand out and seem quietly powerful.



Here, a blocky red house stands in a stripey, blue and yellow landscape. The painter wanted to use simple shapes and primary colours to create a new, 'pure' art.



